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# One Ring to Rule Them All: Power and Surveillance in the Film Adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*

BY CHERYLYNN SILVA

Cherylynn Silva is an English major graduating in 2006. This piece was a final project for a class on Foucault's *Discipline & Punish* that became her Honors thesis under the mentorship of Dr. Kathleen Vejvoda. She presented a form of this paper at the Tolkien 2005 conference in Birmingham, England, and a different version of it will be published in the essay collection currently titled *How We Became Middle-Earth*.

If power is always related "to the historical production of truth," as Michel Foucault maintains, then any examination of power in the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* must take into account the role of history (McHoul 57). As the prologue of the first film reveals, the history of the *The Lord of the Rings* consists of the Ring's creation, the Great War that ensued, and the severing of the Ring from Sauron's hand. Through this history, central to the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Ring becomes a perfect exemplar of how knowledge creates power. As Foucault states, "there is no [...] knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute [...] power relations" (27). While Sauron does have actual power, the characters' knowledge of that power enhances and extends it so much so that even when he is disembodied, their fear of Sauron remains. This fear is often expressed as fear of the Ring and is already visible in the prologue, in which Galadriel asserts that "the power of the Ring could not be undone" and "the Ring of Power has a will of its own" (Walsh, *Fellowship*).

The belief in Sauron's omnipotence is clearly demonstrated when Saruman, the greatest of the wizards, succumbs to despair because of his use of a palantír. Saruman allies himself with Sauron because of the information he receives through the palantír. This information leads him to believe that "[a]gainst the power of Mordor there can be no victory" (Walsh, *Fellowship*). The capitulation of Saruman reinforces the Foucauldian notion that power produces truth through knowledge. The truth, as Saruman sees it, is that Sauron is insurmountable. Yet, Sauron needs others to believe this fiction for it (and through it, him) to have any power. If Saruman did not believe in this produced truth, it would have no power over him.

Denethor also succumbs to despair as a result of trusting a palantír. Although Denethor's use of the palantír is not directly recounted in Jackson's *The Return of the King*, he exclaims, "Do you think the eyes of the white tower are blind?"



I have seen more than you know," implicitly admitting that he has looked into the palantír. In the novel he is directly referring to the palantír in his hand. In the film, Denethor's further assertion that "Against the power that has risen in the east, there is no victory" is related to the knowledge, fed to him by Sauron through the palantír, that the Black Ships are approaching Gondor. (What he does not know is that those ships hold Aragorn and his army, and not the enemy.) Sauron's deliberate misinformation causes Denethor's despair and thus consolidates Sauron's power over him.

While the other characters believe in Sauron's supremacy, they do not yield to the despair he promotes. As Kocher notes, "The whole venture of the Ring always looks desperate. [...] Yet against all persuasions to despair, Gandalf, Aragorn, [...] and all those who fight beside them hope on and keep on acting upon their hope. Without that, Sauron would have won a dozen times over" (55-56). Their irrational persistence indicates that although they acknowledge, what Foucault would call the produced truth, they do not fully submit to it. They possess a gleam of hope, symbolized by the journey of the hobbits. Although Frodo and Sam's mission is often deemed a "fool's hope," the other characters protect Middle Earth from the encroaching armies of Mordor and Isengard in order to give Frodo and Sam time to destroy the Ring. In this way, they resist the "discourse of truth" (Brown 31). As Brown explains, "discourses are loci of knowledge [that are] neither stable nor monolithic," and "no discourse [can] cover the diversity of truths" (31). Each character resists the produced discourse of truth that Sauron is invincible by allowing the small hope that there could be an outcome other than their destruction. By doing this, they oppose the dominant idea and create their own truth. It is the possibility for truths other than the one produced by the dominant power that makes Sauron's downfall ultimately achievable.

Even though he carries the Ring, Frodo has no control over it, because it is the physical representation of Sauron himself. As the Ring bearer, Frodo becomes "a reality

fabricated by this specific technology of power [that Foucault calls] a 'discipline'" (Foucault 194). Frodo is in physical control of the Ring, but he is, as Foucault would say, disciplined by it. This discipline may not be as rigorous as Foucault's example of a prison timetable in his work *Discipline and Punish*, wherein every moment of the day has a specific and regimented purpose; but Frodo does have a specific purpose: to go to Mordor and destroy the Ring. He must do this before he is found or Sauron's armies overwhelm Middle Earth. And while "Traditionally, power was what was seen [...] disciplinary power [...] is exercised through its invisibility" (Foucault 187). The importance of not being seen is obvious when, in order to avoid capture, Frodo changes his name, hides his purpose and prohibits any obvious firelight. But capture is an ever-present possibility, as Sauron has many creatures searching for Frodo, including the ubiquitous Ringwraiths.

Frodo can escape observation if he wears the Ring, which makes him invisible. But, in doing so, he subjects himself to the "All seeing eye" of Sauron. The more he wears the Ring, the more he subjects himself to this "inspecting gaze [...] which each individual under its weight [begins...] interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 155). Thus he is in constant fear of being seen, whether he is physically visible or not, and "it is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault 187). When wearing the Ring, Frodo's situation parallels that of the prisoners under the surveillance of the Panopticon: the prisoners are kept under endless surveillance, and yet they are invisible to each other. Similarly, when Frodo is wearing the Ring, he cannot clearly see the world around him, but he can see – and be seen by – Sauron's great "lidless" Panoptic eye.

While Sauron may be the "all seeing eye," he is far from the omnipotent force that Saruman believes he is. As Foucault observes, "the perfect disciplinary gaze would make



it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (Foucault 173). But Sauron cannot do this: his inability to see beyond his realm without the assistance of palantíri and Ringwraiths illustrates his lack of omnipotence. To effectively use his palantír, Sauron must rely on the weakness of various individuals who also have palantíri. His reliance on the Ringwraiths also demonstrates his imperfect gaze. He needs the Ringwraiths to capture Frodo and the Ring, but they are remarkably ineffectual. They are, however, perfect examples of Foucauldian delinquents.

According to Foucault, the modern prison system is interested not in torturing the body but in controlling the soul. Once criminals are punished, he argues, they are forever caught up in the prison system as part of an information-gathering network serving the dominant power. Foucault refers to this inconspicuous incorporation as "delinquency." Similarly, the Ringwraiths were once "men, who above all else, desire[d] power," and as Aragorn explains to Frodo, because of their lust for power, they became "blinded by their greed, [...] one by one falling into darkness. Now they are slaves to



Figure 1 – While appearing very similar to the central tower of a Panopticon, Sauron's eye is focused on one place and is not "all-seeing." Image © New Line Cinema, 2003.

[Sauron's] will" (Walsh, *Fellowship*). Just as the delinquency of the criminal gives the dominant power a wider range of surveillance, the Ringwraiths hunt Frodo for Sauron because Sauron possesses their souls. The Ringwraiths are unable to

capture Frodo; but as Foucault makes clear, in the modern prison system the role of the delinquent is not to apprehend. Their purpose is to observe, a task that the Ringwraiths do fulfill.

Gollum is a far more efficient tool of the Dark Lord. Unlike the Ringwraiths, he successfully locates and tracks Frodo, feigning servitude in an attempt to gain the Ring. Gollum's surveillance of Frodo is motivated by his desire for the Ring, rather than by instructions from Sauron. But the Ring is a part of Sauron. This connection between Ring and Dark Lord, paired with the possibility that Gollum was "let out" of Mordor, makes Gollum a more effective, although ultimately more dangerous, delinquent.

If delinquency is the insistent observation of and for the Ring once the individual has been dominated by it, then the Ring can be compared to incarceration. Once incorporated into the disciplinary system, the individual has no power but what is allowed by the prison/Ring. Individuals released from the prison system tend to repeatedly return to it, just as those corrupted by the Ring have an ingrained need to seek it out. This delinquency is demonstrated not only by the Ringwraiths and Gollum but by Sauron himself. While the Ring is a physical extension of Sauron, it is often identified as an independent agent: "*it betrayed* Isildur," "*the Ring of Power perceived*," "*it abandoned* Gollum," "*it wants to return*" (Walsh, *Fellowship*; my emphasis). And despite his supposed omnipotence, Sauron needs the Ring to assume corporeal form, because a large part of his spirit resides within it. Without the Ring, Sauron is not "above fear," as Gandalf puts it. He tells Aragorn, "Doubt ever gnaws at [Sauron]. The rumor has reached him [that] [t]he heir of Númenor still lives. Sauron fears you, Aragorn. He fears what you may become" (Walsh, *Towers*). As the heir to the throne, Aragorn could wield the Ring and destroy Sauron, although in doing so he would become like Sauron. Because of this possibility, Sauron fears his own destruction and enacts a fervent search for the Ring. It is this recidivistic need for the Ring that characterizes Sauron as the ultimate delinquent of his own prison.



By enacting his delinquency, Sauron forms a recognizable (although theoretically imperfect) panoptic image. In *Return of the King*, as Sam and Frodo cross Mordor, they see Sauron's tower and his great eye searching Mordor (Figure 1). This image resembles the panoptic tower, or Panopticon, except that the Panopticon can see everywhere simultaneously while Sauron only observes one place at a time. Sauron's power creates a Panopticon in another sense, however. Mordor is barren, the orcs are tortured perversions of elves, and Sauron's citizens are a monolithic army. As Patrick Curry states, "the non-allegorical nature of the Ring is [...] the willful exercise of power applied instrumentally to the realization of a single overarching goal"; he adds, "[t]he precise nature of that power [is] homogeneity" (146). This eschewing of diversity is likewise the ultimate effect of the Panopticon, which erases all individuality amongst its subjects and produces uniformity as an effect of power. This uniformity is rejected by the diversity of the Fellowship, which includes representatives from each of the Free Peoples of Middle Earth. Even after the Fellowship is broken, the characters each continue to support some aspect of the quest. While Sam and Frodo bring the Ring to Mordor, the others (through various actions) contribute to the survival of the Free Peoples at the battle of Pelennor Fields; ultimately they stand together before the Black Gate to divert Sauron's attention at the essential moment. The Battle of the Last Alliance before the Black Gate parallels Frodo's quest to destroy the Ring because they both necessitate self-sacrifice in the face of insurmountable odds. Each action also constitutes a rejection of the idea of ultimate power.

But the rejection of absolute power is only one step towards the destruction of this power. The success of the mission depends upon the existence of a "loophole" in the Panoptic power structure. In her discussion of Panopticism in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Michelle Burnham examines the existence of these overlooked sites of agency. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as

Burnham points out, a loophole is both "A narrow vertical opening, [...] cut in a wall or other defence, to allow of the passage of missiles" as well as "An outlet or means of escape." In the physical sense, the major loophole in *The Lord of the Rings* is the tunnel that comprises Shelob's lair. When Frodo and Sam make it to Mordor they come to a giant black gate guarding the entrance. Unaware of any other way in, they are about to walk through Mordor's main gate when Gollum stops them. He leads them to a tunnel through the mountains, which is also the lair of Shelob, a giant spider. This space is unobserved by Sauron because it is unknown by outsiders, and Shelob kills all who enter. Gollum also knows about Shelob and is luring Frodo to her in order to get the Ring from Frodo's corpse. This passage in the mountain creates what Burnham refers to as an "inevitable blind spot" in Panopticism (Burnham 289). This blind spot exists "in sites that elude the gaze not because they are outside the structure [...] but because they are clearly and centrally a part of it"; Sauron is not watching the tunnel through the mountains because he does not believe anyone could pass through it (Burnham 289). Of course, Frodo would be unable to survive Shelob without Galadriel's phial, whose light repels Shelob and becomes a method for attaining agency. Thus, the loophole is created "by relocating agency [here symbolized by the phial] in the juncture between the structure [the tunnel] and the subject [Frodo]" (Burnham 289). Frodo's access to the tunnel and repulsion of Shelob create a combination of circumstances that Sauron is unable to predict. The existence of this loophole allows Frodo and Sam to enter Mordor with the Ring, and the passage through the tunnel becomes the "outlet" of freedom for Middle Earth. Shelob's lair also has the physical properties of an actual loophole, "A narrow [...] opening [...] cut in a wall or other defence, to allow [...] the passage of missiles," as the Ring passes through this loophole to become the weapon that destroys Sauron.



Because Gollum is the character who destroys the Ring, his role in facilitating the physical loophole is essential. As a delinquent, Gollum can be said to “inevitably support the dominant power structures [he] might have set out to resist and subvert” (Burnham 285). Gollum resists Sauron, and the Ring’s attempt to return to him, because he wants the Ring for himself. With this selfish desire he tracks and finds Frodo. Yet, if Gollum was “let out” of Mordor, as Gandalf speculates, then he unknowingly assists Sauron in his search for Frodo. Gollum ultimately – and also unintentionally – thwarts Sauron and fulfills Frodo’s quest to destroy the Ring, thus inadvertently subverting his own desire. His need for the Ring (and perhaps a bit of what Tolkien calls ‘chance’) enables the quest to succeed where it otherwise would have failed. Not only does Gollum show Frodo Shelob’s tunnel, which is the only unobserved entrance to Mordor, but he also delivers the Ring into the lava when Frodo could not. By trying to hinder the quest, Gollum completes it.

Yet Gollum isn’t the only delinquent to undermine his own aspirations. The men who became Ringwraiths took the Rings of Power for their own self-aggrandizement. But instead of gaining power they became wraiths, enslaved to a stronger will. Even Sauron’s actions inevitably cause his demise. Before he made the Ring, Sauron had the ability, however difficult and time consuming, to recorporealize his spirit after (supposed) death. When Sauron created the Ring, however, he did so by infusing a large piece of his spirit within it. This initially made Sauron stronger, but when the Ring is separated from him, he diminishes. When the Ring is destroyed there is not enough of Sauron’s spirit left to retain any cohesive form and, according to the novel, he “rose a huge shape of shadow...terrible but impotent,” to be taken by the wind (Tolkien 928). Thus, in creating the Ring for his own selfish motives, he actually undermines his true purpose by creating the only possibility for his complete destruction.

Sauron’s single-mindedness doubly hinders his ultimate goal. When Aragorn confronts Sauron through the Gondorian

palantír, Sauron assumes Aragorn has the Ring because, as the heir to Gondor, he would be capable of wielding it, and it would be suicidal to attack Mordor without it. This assumption backfires on Sauron as Aragorn’s challenge is only a lure to assist Frodo and Sam by emptying Mordor of its armies. Sauron’s narrow-mindedness is best stated by Gandalf when he says, “that we should seek to destroy [the Ring] has not yet entered [his] darkest dreams” (Walsh, *Towers*). In his myopia, Sauron is unable to understand that anyone could resist the Ring, much less give up their lives to destroy it. This “inability of complete evil to understand self-renunciatory motives is consciously exploited by Sauron’s antagonists in their decision to attempt the destruction of the Ring” (Rosebury 37). Sauron’s inability to understand the thoughts of others enables his destruction and proves that he is not an omnipotent, “all-seeing” Panopticon. The knowledge that creates the Panopticon’s power – the knowledge of an everlasting, anonymous gaze – reinforces the control of the Panopticon. The gaze of the tower cannot be influenced because the guards are numerous and ever changing. Sauron’s gaze, on the other hand, is individualized, and because he has a specific and well-known agenda, he can be easily manipulated.

In the end the most obvious loophole is perhaps the least easy to recognize. This is the idea of combating despair with hope. In order for the quest to exist, there must be the belief, however small, in success against this supposedly omnipotent being. This hope, a resistance to the produced truth which is manifested in differing degrees by all the good characters, is the most pervasive loophole. Sauron fails to recognize the determination of individuals, reminding us that the Panopticon “allows thought to remain hidden, even under the most intense scrutiny” (Burnham 286). The inability to control thought weakens the dominant truth and becomes the flaw that destroys the entire apparatus of authoritative power. As Burnham explains in the context of African-American Slavery, “those seemingly monolithic methods of



surveillance that ostensibly make escape from detection impossible may finally enable escape by the very fact that they make it seem so impossible" (Burnham 288). In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron's downfall is enacted by his own seeming omnipotence, and the once powerful "all seeing eye" falls to a hobbit-sized flaw.

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